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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000179

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SUBJECT: MAE SOT: REFUGEES BEMOAN BURMESE EXILES; HUMANITARIAN NEEDS GROWING; BORDER QUIET

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Political infighting among the exiles in Thailand came as a surprise to recent arrivals fleeing the violent crackdown in Burma. The number of Burmese crossing into Thailand since the regime cracked down on demonstrations in September remains steady, but several contacts pointed to signs the humanitarian crisis inside Burma is worsening. During a November 8-9 visit to Mae Sot, in Thailand's Tak Province, exile groups appealed to Rangoon and Chiang Mai poloffs for funding to promote democratic change, but most were unable to specify precisely how they would use the money. Our visit did not provide evidence that exile groups in Thailand directed recent protests in Burma. Though political change is the only long-term solution to Burma's humanitarian crisis, Washington may want to consider augmenting humanitarian aid until Burma has a government that is willing and able to address the needs of the Burmese people. End Summary.

Burmese Student Leaders Shocked and Dismayed over Exile Groups' Divisions

¶2. (C) On November 9, National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB - an umbrella organization of Burmese political groups) officials took us to the Mae Sot headquarters of the National League for Democracy Liberated Areas (NLDLA) political party to meet with Burmese who recently fled to Thailand. We expected a low-key meeting. Instead we arrived to find approximately thirty of the escapees seated in rows in the courtyard of the complex. At least half a dozen NCUB officials, many with digital cameras, stood by watching and photographing the event as we tried to speak with the new arrivals.

¶3. (C) While reluctant to speak at first, the new arrivals told us most of them had participated in the September demonstrations and subsequently fled out of fear they would be arrested or killed by the regime. They described how the initial exuberance of the demonstrations gave way to sheer terror as the regime violently suppressed the protests and methodically hunted down those who had participated. Most said they had not been politically active in the past but spontaneously joined the protests in the wave of excitement and optimism that surrounded them. All but a handful said they did not know of plans for the demonstrations ahead of time and only learned of them when they first saw protestors hit the streets. Most reported they had seen the authorities beat and arrest protestors and some reported seeing their fellow citizens killed. About half said they had been able to get messages to their loved ones in Burma

by phone or e-mail, but all were worried for their families' well being and told us they would like to return home as soon as possible.

¶ 14. (C) Not everyone was happy with the arrangements the NCUB had made for the meeting. After the group discussion broke up, two recently-arrived political activists told us in private that they were shocked and dismayed with the infighting in the NCUB and exile community in general. The two, one of whom is known to Embassy Rangoon as a pro-democracy activist, told us they had actively participated in the demonstrations since August and escaped to Thailand in October. Despite what they described as their commitment and experience, they told us the NCUB rebuffed their offer to continue their work from within Thailand. They complained they had not been told about our visit and questioned why the NCUB would have kept them in the dark. "It's not like this in Burma," one of them said, "there we all work together." Both expressed an interest in resettling to the U.S., and at least one has already made contact with Embassy Bangkok.

¶ 15. (C) We met separately with three Buddhist monks who said they had participated in the September demonstrations and had fled shortly after the crackdown began. They told us there was little planning involved in the monk-led demonstrations. They described how they only learned of the demonstrations the morning they first took place. There were no planning meetings, no master plan, they said. Monks from their monasteries decided on their own to attend the processions, often against the advice of more senior monks.

¶ 16. (C) The regime targeted those monasteries that had participated in the demonstrations, according to the monks we met. All three monks reported their monasteries had been nearly emptied during the crackdown. They told us they were forced to flee their monasteries and return to their native villages to avoid arrest. But even then they did not feel safe, they said.

One monk from a monastery in Rangoon told us that authorities approached him after he had returned to his village in Shan State to warn him that he could be arrested at any time for what he had done. It was then, he said, that he decided to flee to

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Thailand.

Steady Stream of Refugees Crossing

¶ 17. (C) Separately, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Protection Officer Alexander Novikau told us on November 9 that approximately 80 Burmese have crossed the border into Mae Sot since the crackdown began, claiming that they participated in the demonstrations. Novikau said that UNHCR can do little more than provide them with Provincial Admission Board (PAB) slips, and wait for the PABs to consider their cases. UNHCR is not thoroughly screening them, he said, leaving that task to the PABs when they eventually convene. Novikau characterized Thailand's posture towards the new arrivals as "wait and see," noting that the PABs have not operated regularly for some time now, and that the Royal Thai Government (RTG) still has not formally entered into an agreement with UNHCR to accord it the same status as other UN bodies with a presence in Thailand.

¶ 18. (C) According to Dr. Cynthia Maung, who runs the well-known Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot providing medical services to displaced Burmese, the humanitarian crisis is worsening. The biggest problems, she said, were malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS, an increase in injuries caused by landmines, and significantly higher numbers of Burmese school-aged children now living in the Mae Sot area. According to Terry Smith, one of the doctors who helps staff the clinic voluntarily on a rotating basis, the clinic diagnoses approximately 8,000 cases of malaria, 300 TB, and 200 HIV cases annually. The clinic treats the malaria patients on its own, Smith said, while MSF France provides treatment for the TB patients. Dr. Cynthia told us the clinic recently entered into an agreement with a public hospital in Mae Sot to provide Anti-Retro Viral treatment to HIV positive

patients, but that only 12 had so far been able to take advantage of the program since all participants had to commit to remain in Thailand for the entire course of treatment, which many of her patients were unable or unwilling to do. Regarding the increase in school-aged children being served by the clinic and Burmese community-based organizations in Mae Sot, Dr. Cynthia said that the number of children needing assistance had risen from 5,000 in 2006 to 8,000 this year. Additionally, she told us that her clinic treated 38 landmine victims in the first six months of this year as compared to 30 during all of 2006.

¶9. (C) In addition to services the clinic provides in Mae Sot, Dr. Cynthia told us about care the clinic is able to offer to people inside Burma. In areas where there is still ongoing conflict between ethnic groups and the Burma Army, she said the clinic has small teams (three to five people) of back-pack medics who test for and treat malaria, provide basic maternal care services, and teach school children about basic hygiene. Teams in these areas also build latrines and help protect the population's drinking water supply. She said the clinic has about 90 such teams deployed to Karen, Karenni, Shan and Rakine States. In areas where fighting is not ongoing, Dr. Cynthia said her teams are able to work with the ethnic groups to set up labs and basic obstetrics facilities. When we asked what the clinic's most pressing needs were, Dr. Cynthia noted the lack of an appropriately-equipped training room, pharmacy storage space, sleeping accommodations for her staff, proper facilities for a new school, and the fact that most of the clinic's staff do not have legal residence in Thailand.

¶10. (C) Contacts at the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) echoed Dr. Cynthia's sentiments regarding the humanitarian situation. They told us that over 1,000 Karen had been displaced this year alone and that in response to the sharp increase in landmine injuries this year, they were preparing to initiate a landmine removal program next month with the help of an Austrian foundation. The CIDKP's main objectives, they told us, are to raise awareness about the plight of the Karen, seek humanitarian assistance for IDPs, and disseminate information about the regime's human rights violations. In addition to the landmine removal program, the CIDKP also produces a newsletter with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, runs a program to raise awareness about the dangers of landmines, and supports 30 mobile medical clinics throughout Karen State.
(Note: These clinics are in addition to the teams Dr. Cynthia's clinic has on the ground there. End Note.) The CIDKP appealed to us for funding to support its work, and we encouraged them to submit a specific proposal to us while at the same time suggesting that they consider other funding sources.

Political Groups Overstate Their Role and Aimlessly Seek Support

¶11. (C) At a November 8 dinner, Kyaw Kyaw of the Political Defiance Committee told us he knew of the Rangoon demonstrations at least a week before they took place, and intimated they were

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organized by the NCUB and other exile groups. Unfortunately, when pressed, he was unable or unwilling to provide any specifics regarding what role they played or what future plans they have. We made sure Kyaw Kyaw had our contact information and urged him to inform us in advance next time demonstrations were planned, which he agreed to do. Similarly, at a November 9 meeting with the NCUB, members spoke of a significant role for the group in orchestrating the protests, and appealed for USG funding to support their efforts and those of political parties inside Burma. As in the case of the CIDKP, we encouraged the NCUB to draft a proposal and submit it to us.

Comment

¶12. (C) We were particularly struck, but not surprised, by the newly arrived activists' disappointment with the exile groups' failure to work in concert for change in Burma. Although the

NCUB sees itself as a significant political player, our trip did not generate evidence that it orchestrated or had advance knowledge of recent protests in Burma. Most participants, we noted, told us that the protests, and their own decisions to participate, were spontaneous. This trip also highlighted the excellent work being done by some organizations to provide much-needed humanitarian relief to Burmese living in the border area. We would support Department efforts to increase assistance to address the humanitarian needs of the growing number of Burmese refugees in Thailand. End Comment.

T13. (U) This cable was co-drafted by CG Chiang Mai and Embassy Rangoon, and was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.

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